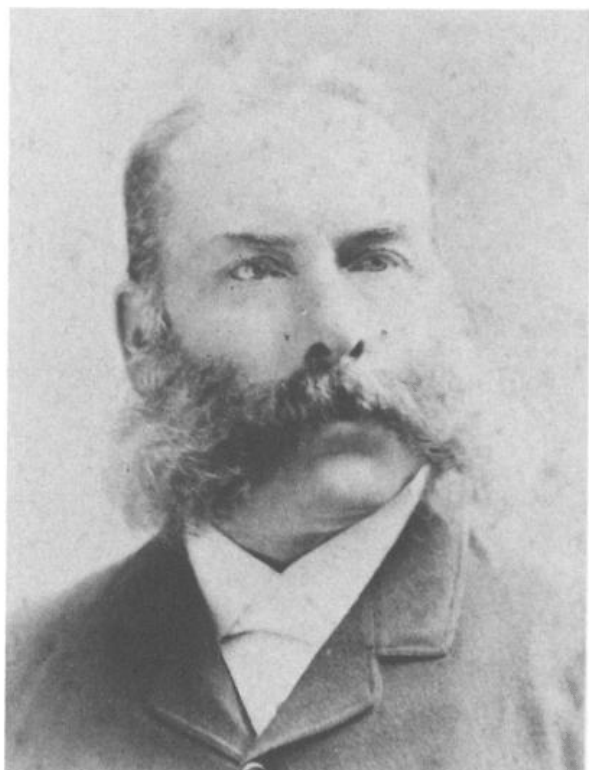


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



George B. Pelham
1831-1889

George Browne Pelham was one of several architects who came to Portland in the wake of the Great Fire of 1866. Like most of those designers arriving from outside of Maine who participated in the rebuilding of the city, Pelham did not receive many commissions, resulting in a brief stay. Yet the distinctive English style of his three churches and one of his two residences made a contribution to Portland architecture far greater than their number would indicate.

Born in Surrey, England, near London, in 1831, George B. Pelham was the second son of Jabez and Mary Browne Pelham. Jabez Pelham was an attorney.¹ How George Pelham began his architectural career is unclear. Family tradition maintains that he graduated from Cambridge University in 1852 with a degree in architecture and started work in a London architect's office that year. However, Cambridge has no record of his enrollment, and he is first listed in the London trade directory in 1857 as a builder.² That profession appeared

on his marriage certificate when he wed Eliza Bullivant in the Parish of St. Giles, Camberwell, Surrey, on March 28, 1857. Their marriage produced two daughters and a son.³

The Pelhams may well have remained in England had it not been for the attraction of a major building project on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1857 Queen Victoria chose Ottawa as the capital of Canada, a British possession ten years away from nationhood. Two years later a competition was held for the new Parliament Buildings, with the Toronto firm of Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones winning the commission for the Government House and Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver of Ottawa being awarded the design of the Ministerial Building. Both structures were massive and elaborate stone essays in the High Victorian Gothic style which took seven years to complete.

George Pelham's part in this ambitious undertaking is uncertain. Clearly incorrect are his *New York Times* obituary and family tradition which both state that he was the architect for the Canadian Parliament Buildings.⁴ Closer to the truth is the statement at his death by the New York magazine *Building* that, "In 1859 he was sent by the British Government to superintend the erection of the present government buildings at Ottawa."⁵ This superintending role is echoed in his death notice in the *Canadian Architect and Builder* as well as in family information.⁶

The most precise indication of Pelham's work in Canada is found in a document published in Quebec in 1863 entitled, *Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into Matters Connected with the Public Buildings at Ottawa*. This publication noted that "Mr. Hutchinson and Pelham had been clerks of works on the Department buildings. This mode of association was adopted, that no part of the work should be omitted, that one should check the other, and that data for a comparison should be afforded..."⁷ The Departmental Buildings referred to were the east and west blocks of the Parliament Hill complex.

With the completion of the Parliament Buildings in 1866, George Pelham began to consider new opportunities. On July 4th of that year, Portland suffered the most devastating urban fire yet experienced in America. Among the several architectural and engineering offices to form in response to this disaster was Anderson, Bonnell & Company. John Anderson and William Bonnell were local civil engineers, who arranged with Matthew

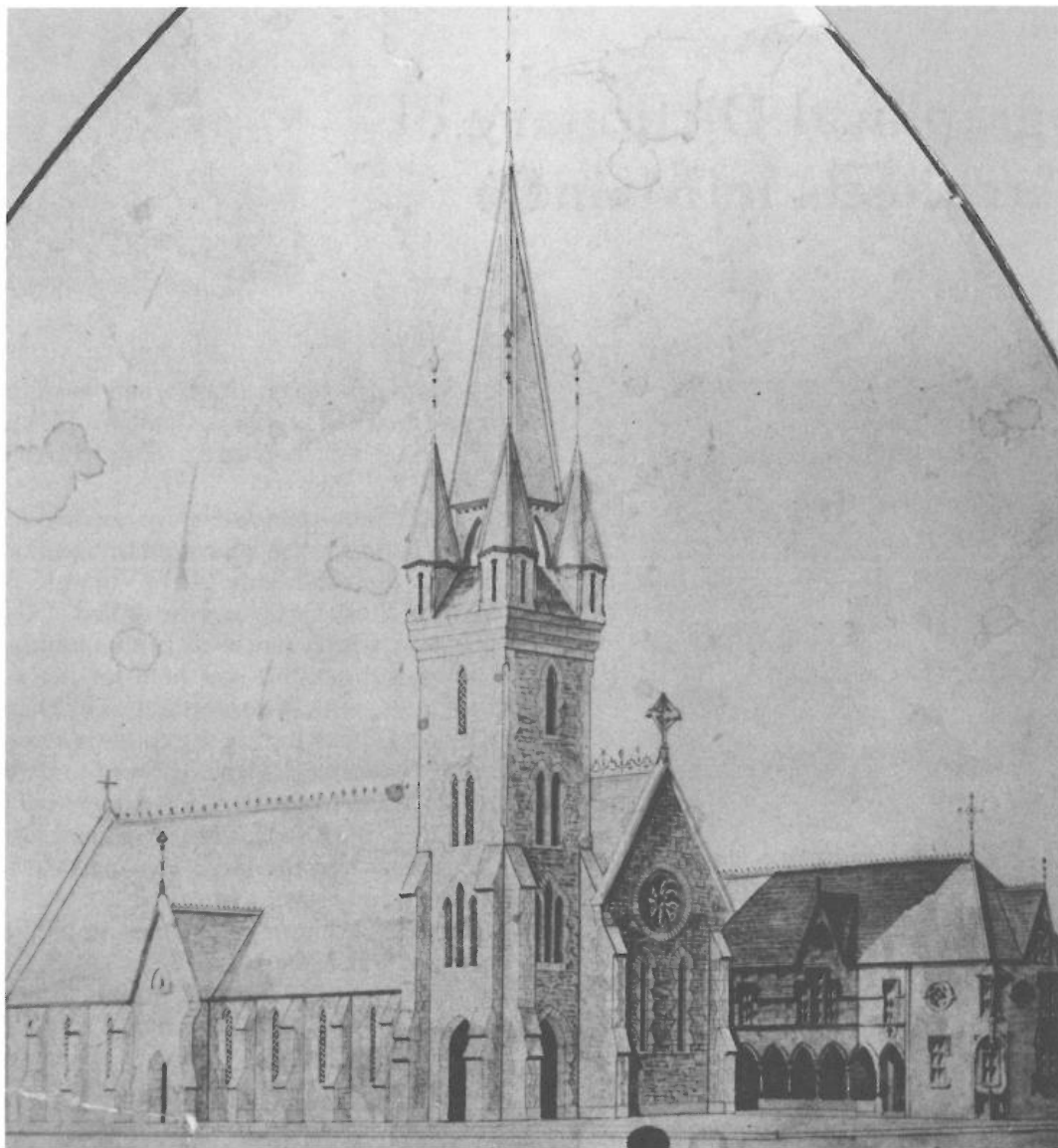


Figure 1. Rendering of St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Rectory, Portland, by George B. Pelham (Courtesy St. Paul's Episcopal Church).

Stead of St. John, New Brunswick to provide the firm's architectural services. Stead worked in association with Anderson and Bonnell at least until June of 1867. The following April, an advertisement in the *Portland Daily Press* announced that Bonnell had left Anderson to form a new partnership with George Pelham:

Bonnell & Pelham
Engineers & Architects
To Parties about to build.
Plans, Specifications and Estimates made,
and Buildings Superintended by
Geo. B. Pelham, Architect
Office Canal Bank Building, Portland⁸

Pelham's first Portland commission was to design a church and rectory for the newly formed Episcopal parish of St. Paul's, which held its first meeting on June 4, 1868.⁹ Adopting the name of the area's original Anglican parish of 1763, these Episcopalians were former members of the fire ravaged St. Stephen's

Church who wanted to establish a place of worship in the eastern section of the city. The parish lost no time in raising funds, purchasing the lot at Congress and Locust Streets, and procuring Pelham's services. Ground was broken on October 2, 1868, and the cornerstone was laid on November 5th.¹⁰ Less than nine months later on July 23, 1869, the first service was held in the new church.¹¹ The cost of the church itself was \$11,700, while an additional \$3,500 was spent for the adjoining rectory.¹²

George B. Pelham's design for St. Paul's Church as well as his superintendence of its construction resulted in one of Maine's most picturesque examples of nineteenth century Gothic Revival ecclesiastical architecture (Figures 1 & 2). Based upon English medieval country and village churches, St. Paul's was described in the *Portland Daily Press* for July 23, 1869:

The edifice is by no means complete, only a portion of the nave having been erected, leaving a section of about thirty feet to be added at some future day, besides the tower



Figure 2. St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Rectory, Portland, c. 1875 view (MHPC).

and an aisle on the easterly side. The building is of blue trap rock, with buttresses supporting the walls. The interior is 64 by 36 feet, with open timbered roof, and finished to the point of the rafters, a height of 48 feet. The windows are of gray quarry glass with colored borders. The benches are of solid oak, very heavy and substantial, and will accommodate about 400 persons. The general aspect of the interior is almost severly plain, the walls being of a light drab tint, and the ceiling colored light blue. The chancel is 16 by 20 feet, lighted by two lancet and a large rose window of choice design. Opening out of the chancel on the right is a robing room and study.

Funds were never found to complete Pelham's plan for an additional thirty feet to the nave, a fifteen foot east aisle, and a tower eighteen feet square and one hundred feet tall. Viewing the architect's presentation drawing makes one grateful that the huge stone tower was not carried out, for its elaborate culmination in a central spire flanked on each corner by a smaller spire appears overscaled for the building. By remaining uncompleted, St. Paul's actually came far closer to realizing its intentions of recreating an English parish church.

The building's charm is enhanced by its adjacent two story frame rectory, in which Pelham's design was realized in every detail. The church is set back from Congress Street, allowing for the connected rectory to extend on the east side of the lot to the street, thus creating a courtyard appearance. This effect is enhanced by the rectory's recessed porch which features a series of five Gothic arches. Other medieval motifs include Gothic window moldings on the first and second stories and two gables which pierce the high hipped roof. Taken as a whole, the design and siting of St. Paul's Church and Rectory reflect a masterful use of a restricted urban corner lot.

Contemporary with St. Paul's was the design and construction of the Warren Congregational Church of 1868-69 in Westbrook (Figures 3 & 4). Located in the village of Cumberland Mills, this large frame Gothic Revival church was built under the auspices of Samuel D. Warren of Boston, who had established his paper manufacturing business in the community in 1854. Warren paid for half of the \$15,000 cost.¹³

George Pelham's plan for the Warren Church incorporated the mid-nineteenth century innovation of providing for ground story function rooms with the auditorium above them. Also typical of the period was the desire to make one material appear as another in the form of wooden sheathing which read as stone blocks. The fanciful secondary facade tower was reminiscent of the unbuilt corner tower of St. Paul's as were the large corner tower and the side wall buttresses.

The day after dedication ceremonies on July 8, 1869, the *Portland Daily Press* reported on Westbrook's new church:

The extreme length, including tower and pulpit recess, is 90 feet, and the width 45 feet. It is built so that a short flight of steps inside a high vestry, 10½ feet in height, is afforded, with committee and library rooms. The auditorium is very neatly arranged, the walls being painted in light colors with the ceiling frescoed in blue with gilt stars and with a beautiful cabinet organ. The pulpit is of black walnut and oak, and the pulpit chairs are upholstered in green rep. The church is lighted by eight lancet windows of ground and colored glass.

As George B. Pelham's churches in Portland and Westbrook moved toward completion in the spring of 1869, he was invited to submit a plan for the remodelling of the Greek Revival style High Street Congregational

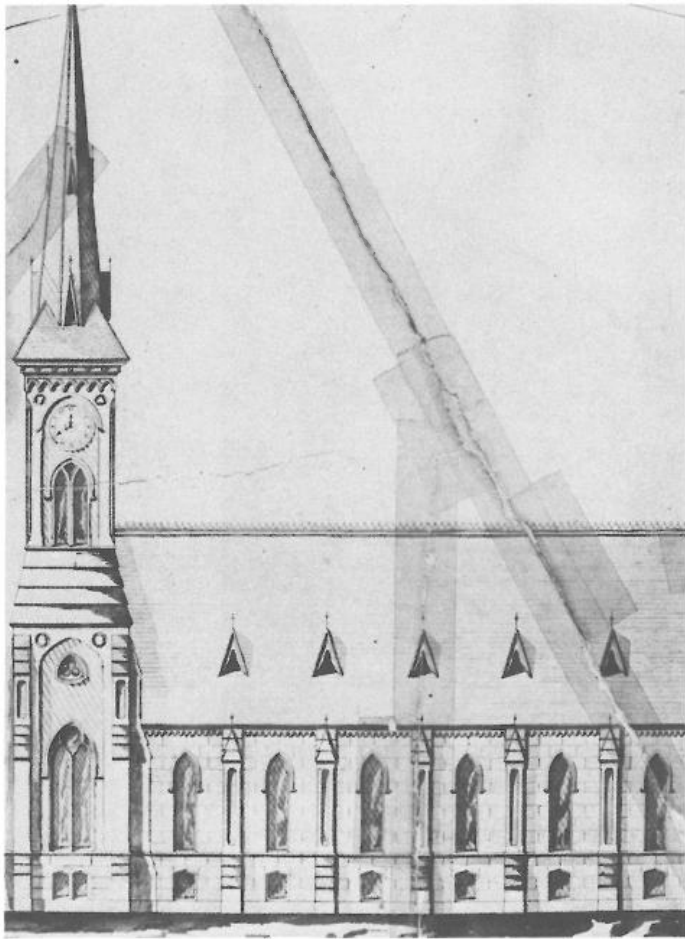


Figure 3. Side elevation of Warren Congregational Church, Westbrook, by George B. Pelham (Courtesy Maine Historical Society).

Church of 1831 (Figure 5). Pelham's Gothic Revival design was chosen on May 17, 1869, in competition with three other architects, including the popular Francis H. Fassett. Although updating an existing building rather than constructing a new one, the High Street project was to prove more costly than St. Paul's and Warren combined. Originally estimated at \$28,800, the final cost was \$43,000. Part of this expense resulted from moving the vestry from the basement to a new rear addition.¹⁴

On May 18, 1869, the *Portland Daily Press* described the plan for the exterior alteration which had been adopted the evening before;

It comprehends an entire change to the front and an extension towards the street of about twelve feet. The front elevation is very handsome and is of the Gothic order of architecture. It has a small tower on each corner and a large and imposing one in the middle, one hundred and twenty-three feet high, surmounted by a spire, the whole to be brick covered with mastic. The side walls are to be kept but strengthened and ornamented with pilasters.

During the ensuing months, the High Street Congregational Church's dignified wooden Doric portico gave way to an elaborate brickwork essay of Gothic motifs. The interior was transformed as well, as is reflected in the *Portland Transcript* record of the December 30th dedication exercises:

Inside and out the church has been reconstructed so entirely out of its old style as not to be recognized except by its location.

The audience room is finished entirely in black ash, the pews being of a new and beautiful design, and arranged in circle. The front of the gallery is very richly ornamented by a series of sunk quatre-foil panels, with an elaborate cornice. At each end of the church are lofty Gothic lancet arches, in the recess of one of which is the beautiful pulpit, and in the central arch at the rear is the organ behind an ornamental black-ash screen. The walls and ceiling are pure white, the latter arched and ribbed with stucco. Twelve chandeliers, in blue and gilt, light the church. There are 172 pews, accommodating about a thousand people.¹⁵

In addition to George Pelham's three churches, he was responsible for two residential structures, the three unit Lunt Block of 1868 on India Street and his own double house project of 1868-69 on Locust Street. Row and double house construction were not new in Portland, the first row having been built on Pearl Street in 1828 and probably the earliest duplex on Free Street a quarter of a century before. For a community confined to a peninsula, land was at a premium, especially in the post fire building boom.

Of the two, the Lunt Block was the more conventional. Located on the west side of India Street between Congress and Federal, it measured sixty-five feet long by thirty-two feet deep and had two principal stories with a high basement and a Mansard roof. Its brick construction featured three deeply recessed arched doorways and handsomely enframed Palladian windows across the first story facade. Each unit contained thirteen rooms, the first, second, and third floors being posted ten, nine, and eight feet respectively.¹⁶

More unusual was Pelham's frame double house on Locust Street immediately adjacent to St. Paul's Church. The parish leased its architect his lot on November 2, 1868, and in late March of the following year he sold the duplex which he had constructed on the property.¹⁷ Whether he occupied one of the two units or undertook the venture on speculation is unclear.

What George Pelham erected on Locust Street was a third complementing element to St. Paul's and its rectory. The two and a half story symmetrical facade contained a recessed gable with two arched entrances on the first floor. This central section was flanked on either side by the major portion of a unit. Each side featured large first and second story bay windows and a bold Flemish gabled roof line. Gothic window moldings, crenelated balustrades, quatrefoils, and buttresses were also in evidence on the exterior.

As Portland recovered from the Great Fire, its demand for architects decreased. By 1871 George Pelham moved to New York City, where he continued to practice architecture until his death on May 2, 1889. During his nearly two decades in New York, his work had broadened in scope from churches and residences to apartment houses and industrial structures. The magazine *Building* noted that, "he was for several years architect for the Park Department, during which time he designed the Belvedere and Terrace in Central Park."¹⁸ His architectural legacy to his adopted city included his son George

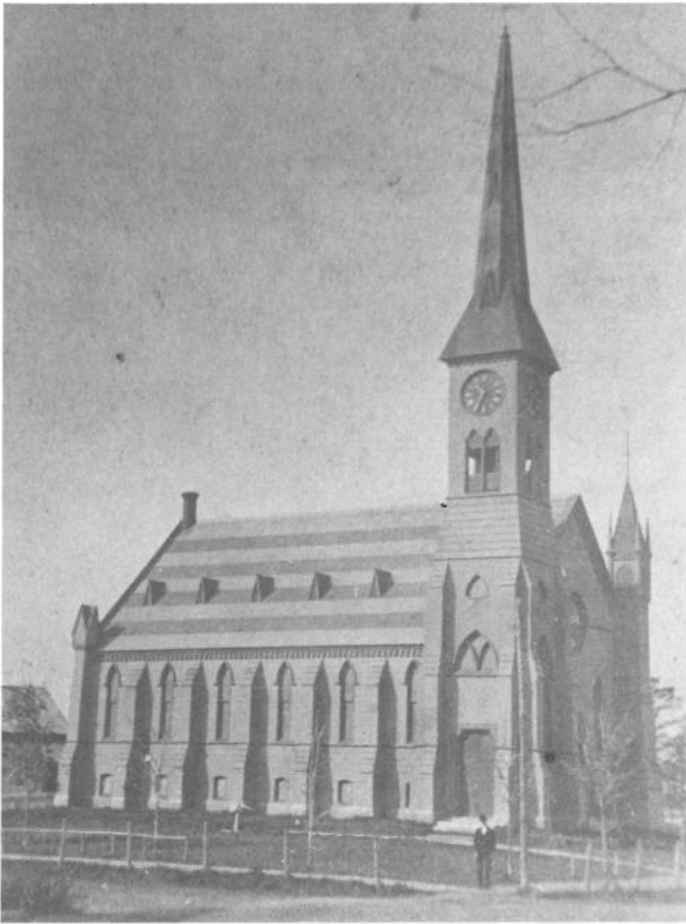


Figure 4. Warren Congregational Church, Westbrook, c. 1875 view (MHPC).

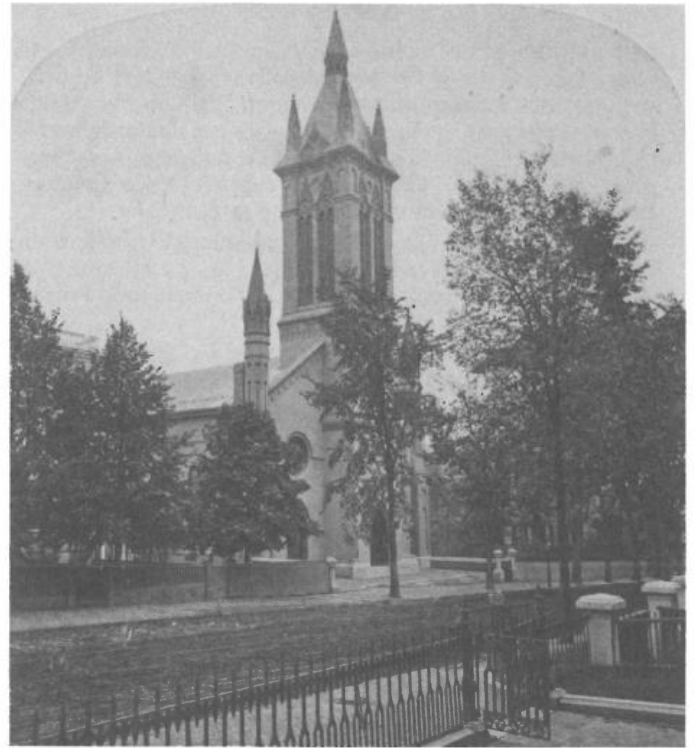


Figure 5. High Street Congregational Church, Portland, c. 1875 view (MHPC).

Frederick Pelham (1866-1937) and his grandson George Frederick Pelham, Jr. (1897-1967), both of whom distinguished themselves as designers of twentieth century apartment buildings.

Time has not been kind to the small body of work which George B. Pelham produced during his short career in Maine. The Warren and High Street Churches are gone, and the India and Locust Street residences have both suffered extensive alterations. Fortunately, Pelham's Portland masterpieces, St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Rectory, remain intact in the use and care of a parish which has continued for six score years to cherish what their English born builder-architect created for them.

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.

NOTES

- ¹ Letter of June 27, 1972, from Mrs. George F. Pelham, Jr., to Grace Trappan, in which the widow of the architect's grandson provides biographical information, Pelham file, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Augusta. Jabez Pelham's profession is termed "solicitor" on his son George's marriage certificate, March 28, 1857, General Register Office, London, as well as in mid-19th century London directories.
- ² Pelham to Trappan, *op. cit.* Letter of January 21, 1987, from Dorothy M. Owen, Keeper of the Archives, Cambridge University, to Roger Reed, Pelham file, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Augusta.
- ³ Marriage certificate of George B. Pelham and Elizabeth Bullivant, March 28, 1857, General Register Offices, London.
- ⁴ *New York Times*, May 3, 1889. Pelham to Trappan, *op. cit.*
- ⁵ *Building*, New York, May 11, 1889, p. 155.
- ⁶ *Canadian Architect & Builder*, May, 1889, p. 59. Pelham to Trappan, *op. cit.*
- ⁷ *Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into Matters Connected with the Public Buildings at Ottawa, Quebec*, 1863, p. 44.
- ⁸ *Portland Daily Press*, April 28, 1868.
- ⁹ "St. Paul's, Portland", *North East*, Portland, January, 1904, p. 52.
- ¹⁰ *Daily Eastern Argus*, Portland, October 3, 1868; November 6, 1868.
- ¹¹ *Daily Eastern Argus*, Portland, July 24, 1869.
- ¹² "St. Paul's, Portland", *op. cit.*
- ¹³ *Portland Daily Press*, July 9, 1869.
- ¹⁴ *Services at the Semi-Centennial of High Street Church*, Portland, 1881.
- ¹⁵ *Portland Transcript*, January 8, 1870.
- ¹⁶ *Portland Evening Star*, June 12, 1868. *Portland Daily Press*, June 15, 1868.
- ¹⁷ Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Portland, Vol. 366, pp. 302-303.
- ¹⁸ *Building*, *op. cit.*

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY GEORGE B. PELHAM

James R. Lunt Block, 96-100 India Street, Portland, 1868, Altered.
 George B. Pelham Block, 15-17 Locust Street, Portland, 1868-69, Altered.
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church and Rectory, 279 Congress Street, Portland, 1868-69, Extant.
 Warren Congregational Church, Cumberland Mills, Westbrook, 1868-1869, Destroyed.
 High Street Congregational Church, Portland, 1869, Remodeling, Destroyed.

Photograph of George B. Pelham
 Courtesy of Mrs. George F. Pelham, Jr.

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